

The Way Forward in Iraq

by [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

Dennis Ross, a former special assistant to President Barack Obama, is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

On January 25, 2007, Institute counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow Dennis Ross testified before the Senate Committee on Armed Services. The following is the prepared text of his remarks.

The challenge today in Iraq is internal. Iraq's leaders must find salvation by reaching across sectarian lines, not waiting for their neighbors or anyone else to take care of their internal adversaries or do for them what they are unwilling to do for themselves. While Iraq's neighbors certainly have influence on different sectarian groups within Iraq, their influence is limited and cannot be exercised in a way that will end the conflict. Iraq's neighbors may be able to contain the conflict, assuming they are prepared to work together, but they will not be able to resolve it.

Nor can the United States resolve the conflict in Iraq. Surely, our troop presence gives us leverage. But it is more limited now than previously. Iraqi governmental or sectarian leaders view our troop presence almost exclusively in terms of how our forces can be used to serve their particular interests. Today, Sunnis seek our protection and our readiness to go after the Shia militias and their death squads. The Shias want our forces to go after the Sunni insurgents, and leave theirs alone.

President Bush's decision to provide a surge of American forces, principally for Baghdad, is designed to provide security in Iraq's largest city. However, in explaining his decision, the President explained that the surge was tied to an Iraqi security plan and to Prime Minister Maliki's commitments on a number of security, political, and economic issues. According to President Bush, Prime Minister Maliki has committed to:

- Provide significant Iraq forces to partner with ours in Baghdad.
- Assume security responsibility in all provinces by November.
- Ensure equal protection for Sunni as well as Shia neighborhoods.
- Pursue those who threaten security and stability without political interference or regard for sectarian concerns.
- Adopt a new law for the sharing of oil revenues and see it implemented.
- Pass new legislation to correct the abuses on de-Baathification.
- Guarantee a fair process for amending the constitution.

- Deliver a \$10 billion fund for reconstruction and assure that monies will also go to Sunni areas, including Anbar province.

- Empower localities by conducting provincial elections.

Even if the Shia militias, particularly the Mahdi Army, are not likely to be seriously confronted any time soon, all of the aforementioned commitments would be very meaningful if carried out. The problem is that most Iraqis are unlikely to believe them. They remember only too well that Prime Minister Maliki's first big initiative was to provide security in Baghdad. He is, by my count, on his third national reconciliation plan. He will have to act on these commitments not merely talk about them.

The irony is that had he performed on his previous promises, we would not need a surge of American forces today. And, unfortunately, if he fails to deliver on these commitments now -- either because they are too hard or his heart isn't in them or the sectarian divide is simply too deep -- it is difficult to see how the surge can make much difference.

Inevitably we are driven back to what Iraqis have to be willing to do for themselves. If Maliki is willing to change course and now take hard steps and press his colleagues and counterparts to do likewise, the surge might be helpful in reinforcing new Iraqi behaviors and showing that there is a payoff for them, particularly in terms of increased security. But if the Sunnis remain emotionally unwilling to accept a subordinate position to the Shia and the Shia continue to act as if they are a majority who can lose power at any moment and can ill afford to accommodate any Sunni needs as a result, neither will adjust, and the surge will be one more failed tactic.

The only tactic that even potentially has the chance of changing Iraqi behaviors at this point is one that demonstrates the cost of nonperformance. For the different Iraqi leaders, the current situation, while bad, is not intolerable. In any case, it is preferable to having to cross historic thresholds on reconciliation. Iraqi leaders have to see that they run the risk of everything unraveling because the United States won't keep the lid on much longer.

In my experience, deep-seated conflicts are not transformed by simply offering inducements to the parties. Inducements, on their own, are never sufficient to confront history and mythology; on the contrary, it takes an unmistakable awareness of the daunting costs of continuing to hold out that finally motivates parties to cross historic thresholds and change their behavior. From this standpoint, I believe the surge only makes sense if President Bush has explicitly told Mr. Maliki in private that he has six months to act credibly on his commitments, and if he does not, we will begin to withdraw forces and we will stop the process of bolstering those Iraqi forces that Maliki most wants to receive arms.

If President Bush has not conveyed such a warning in private and remains unwilling to create consequences for nonperformance, I would suggest that the Congress identify which of the Maliki commitments are most critical for indicating a readiness on the part of the Iraqi government and sectarian leaders to transform themselves and actually forge a national compact. While taking on the militias and the Mahdi army might be the best measure, I would not create an impossible standard. Instead, I believe a number of other measures would offer better indicators of the Iraqi government's intent to make reconciliation a genuine priority: the sharing of oil revenues and the rehabilitation of former Baathi party members (and not just the adoption of laws which might never be implemented); the actual investment of monies in Sunni areas; and the provision of protection to Sunni neighborhoods.

If these or other measures that the Congress decides are important and reasonable are not met -- and once again Maliki has promised but not delivered -- then I would cap our forces, limit security assistance, and begin to develop a strategy for containing the conflict within Iraq. We cannot remain in the midst of a civil war, and yet we don't want the conflict within Iraq, particularly if we are going to reduce our presence over time, to give rise to a wider war in

which nearly all of Iraq's neighbors are intervening to protect their equities or those sectarian groups who are their natural partners.

In circumstances where Iraqi leaders are not willing or able to forge national reconciliation, a Bosnia-model of the sort that Senator Biden, Les Gelb, and Michael O'Hanlon have discussed might offer a tolerable outcome for Iraq. Previously, the argument against any kind of soft partition or Bosnia-type outcome was that inevitably the areas of mixed Sunni-Shia populations were too numerous and population transfers would inevitably turn ugly and very bloody. I took those arguments seriously, but when 100,000 Iraqis are being displaced every month, population transfers are already taking place. Shia death squads by design or through retribution are forcing Sunnis out of mixed neighborhoods and Sunni insurgents and militias have done the same to Shia in Sunni dominated areas. Like it or not, the landscape of Iraq is changing and a soft partition is beginning to emerge and become a reality.

The irony is that international forces might become far more available in a context in which they are safeguarding a soft-partition or Bosnia-type outcome. To be sure, this should not be our first choice; however, desirable outcomes in Iraq appear less and less likely. One thing is for sure: we must begin to position ourselves to make the least bad choice in Iraq-namely, containment of a civil war-possible if hopeful outcomes can not be engineered.

Whether positioning ourselves for a containment strategy, a Bosnian-type approach or a new national compact in Iraq, Iraq's neighbors can play an important role. But for any of these different outcomes to materialize, they will have to behave differently. Iraq's Sunni neighbors have not provided the political or economic help that we have long sought. Saudi Arabia and Jordan, in particular, have much potential leverage with the Sunni tribes, but they have not exercised it. It is not because they have no stakes in Iraq. Saudi leaders are now contemplating the construction of a \$12 billion security barrier along their border with Iraq to prevent terror and instability in Iraq from bleeding into their country. And Jordan, which has already absorbed 750,000 Iraqi refugees, cannot afford to absorb any more.

It is also not because of the Palestinian problem. Some argue that the Saudis, the Gulf States, and Jordan cannot do more in Iraq because the sense of grievance over the Palestinians holds them back from appearing helpful to us in Iraq. That creates a linkage where none exists. The principal Sunni neighbors have not been helpful because they have no interest in promoting Shia dominance in Iraq. The Sunni-Shia divide in the Middle East is becoming more acute. Look at the fixation in the Arab world -- as expressed in the Arab media -- on how Saddam Hussein was executed.

But it is not only their reluctance to see Shia dominance in Iraq that produces their hesitancy. It is also their view that Iran will dominate a Shia-run Iraqi state. Were there a readiness on the part of the Maliki government to truly reach out to the Sunnis within Iraq that could alter the behavior of the Saudis, Kuwaitis, Jordanians and others.

Of course, a complete convulsion within Iraq might also alter their behavior. None of Iraq's Sunni neighbors are likely to remain on the sidelines if there is an all-out civil war. They will not remain indifferent if the Sunni population's survival in Iraq is more fundamentally threatened, if there is the danger of millions of Iraqi refugees approaching their borders, or if Iran intervenes more openly in such a circumstance.

The same is true for Iran and Syria. Presently each is content with an Iraq in which the United States is tied down, preoccupied, and less able, in their eyes, of threatening them. But like Iraq's other neighbors, they can have little interest in an Iraq that begins to unravel. A convulsion in Iraq that might be precipitated by a rapid American withdrawal represents a danger for the Iranians and the Syrians. Neither wants to face huge streams of Iraqi refugees, instability that radiates out of Iraq, the need to compete with the Saudis and others who may intervene within Iraq, and the dangers of Iraq becoming a platform for terror against them.

Much like the different sectarian groups within Iraq, all of Iraq's neighbors might be motivated to change their behavior by their perception of the costs of not doing so. They might cooperate in a containment strategy-with

understandings worked out in a regional forum-if they became fearful that the United States was leaving and an all-out civil war would ensue. Ironically, so long as we keep the lid on in Iraq -- or at least it is perceived that we will do so -- none of Iraq's neighbors or its leaders will likely feel sufficient discomfort to change their behavior.

Our challenge is to create the impression that the lid is going to come off without actually having it come off. That is a hard balance to strike. But that is also why it is important to establish measures on Iraqi performance and to create real consequences for nonperformance. I continue to believe that one way to impress both Iraqis and Iraq's neighbors that there is a consequence (and that the lid might come off) is to declare that we will negotiate a timetable for our withdrawal with the Iraqi government and Iraqi performance will influence how we approach the timing of our drawdown.

Ultimately, our objective in Iraq is still to change the politics to the point that a transition to a new Iraq is possible without massive bloodshed and without an all-out civil war. In these circumstances, our presence would help to manage the transition and gradually be reduced. That objective may no longer be achievable -- or if it is, changes in the behavior of Iraq's government and sectarian leaders must be revealed in the very near future. If it is clear that objective is not achievable, we need to fall-back either to a Bosnian model or a containment alternative. But none of these objectives from the most desirable to the least objectionable is likely to be achievable if Iraq's leaders and neighbors believe that the United States will continue to keep the lid on in Iraq. The trick is convincing them of that without making the worst outcome -- an all-out civil war, with every neighbor intervening to ensure that their Sunni or Shia partner does not lose -- a self-fulfilling prophecy. ❖

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